

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 578

CS 205 215

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 TITLE Adapting the Research of Shaughnessy and Britton for the Composition Classroom.
 PUB DATE Apr 79
 NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary); *English Instruction; Higher Education; *Research Utilization; *Teaching Techniques; *Writing Skills
 IDENTIFIERS *Britton (James); *Shaughnessy (Mina)

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how one teacher has taken the findings of the research done by Shaughnessy as reported in her book, "Errors and Expectations," and the findings of James Britton as reported in his book, "The Development of Writing Abilities (11-18)," and has developed a series of class activities based on their implications. It describes, also, a general approach to teaching composition that is in accord with the major findings of the two research projects and helps students to develop comfort with the writing process. (TJ)

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Maxine Hairston

Adapting the Research of Shaughnessy and Britton

for the Composition Classroom

Maxine Hairston

Although several researchers are currently investigating the composing processes of individuals or small groups of writers, the only two large-scale, comprehensive research projects in composition from which we have data so far are the study done at the City University of New York from 1971-74 by Mina Shaughnessy, and the one done at the University of London from 1966-71 by James Britton and four associates. Shaughnessy's findings are reported in her book Errors and Expectations, published by Oxford University Press in 1977; the Britton study is reported in the book The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18, published in England in 1975 by Schools Council Research Studies and now available through the National Council of Teachers of English.

For her study, Shaughnessy analyzed the style and content of 4000 placement essays written by freshmen entering the City University of New York from 1970-74, the period immediately following the year in which CUNY became an open-admissions university. Within five years from the date of that policy change, the enrollment at CUNY rose more than 50%, and a large proportion of those 90,000 new students were what Shaughnessy calls Basic Writers, writers whom she describes as "students whose difficulties with the written language seemed of a different order from [other students], as if they had come . . . from a different country or at least through different schools, where even the most modest standards of high school literacy had not been met. . . . They were true outsiders."¹ In her analysis of the writing of

¹Mina Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (Oxford University Press, New York, 1977), p. 2.

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these students, Shaughnessy does three things: she identifies the kinds of errors that appear most often, she reasons about the causes of such errors, and she suggests ways in which a teacher might go about helping students to correct them.

For the Britton book, a team of researchers analyzed 2100 pieces of writing produced by 500 students in the first, third, fifth, and seventh years of 65 secondary schools in England and Wales. Their aim was to devise a system that would allow them to characterize accurately the diverse kinds of writing done in schools and to trace the developmental steps involved in producing these kinds of writing. They established three new categories of writing--expressive, transactional, and poetic--to replace the traditional classifications of description, narration, exposition, and argument; they also classified all the pieces of writing according to these categories and also analyzed the function and audience for each piece. Their hypothesis, not entirely substantiated by the study, was that different kinds of writings require different abilities and that students develop those abilities in different ways.

Because my purpose here is to suggest some ways in which teachers can use the findings of these two studies rather than to give a summary of the researchers' conclusions, I will not go into more detail about the books. I want only to add that both books are readable, more so than the typical kind of research study one finds in Research in the Teaching of English. Although each book reports on factual data drawn from a large population, each also gives us reflections and observations about the psychology of writing and writers that are as valuable as the analytic components of the study. Both are written by compassionate and concerned observers who care very much about

teaching people to write. And though Shaughnessy draws most of her observations from the work of unskilled writers, and Britton's group writes about the work of secondary school students, I believe their insights will help the teacher of college writing at any level. In fact, I consider the Shaughnessy book essential reading for any composition teacher.

In each chapter of her book Shaughnessy gives specific suggestions and exercises that will help basic writers substantially reduce the number of errors they make. I have nothing to add to that guidance: rather I will focus on approaches instructors might take to three major psychological writing problems she identifies, problems that I think are found among nearly all beginning writers, not just those with poor basic skills. Those problems are:

1. Students' ignorance about how writers behave and how a piece of writing develops.
2. Students' fear of writing.
3. Students' inability or unwillingness to change a piece of writing once it has been completed.

On the first problem Shaughnessy says,

The subject of how writers work, where and how they get their ideas, how they nurse them into form--including their idiosyncratic preferences for certain kinds of pen or tables or times of day as well as the routines they follow for arriving at final copy--such information is important to the beginning writer. It reveals the mess and privacy of the behavior called writing, and beneath that--a sequence of concentrations that seem implicit in the act of writing.²

²Shaughnessy, p. 81

To give the students some insights into how writers work, I have assembled and keep adding to a collection of quotations and anecdotes about writers. The Paris Review Writers at Work series is valuable, and so are three accounts from writers of non-fiction: Galbraith's essay "Writing, Typing, and Economics" in the March, 1978 Atlantic, an interview with Alfred Kazin in the November, 1978 issue of Composition and Teaching, a new west coast publication, and Barzun's book Writing, Editing, and Publishing. I like to quote Barzun on writers' idiosyncracies:

We know that Mark Twain liked to write lying in or on a bed; we know that Schiller needed the smell of apples rotting on the desk. Some like cubicles, others vasty halls. Writers' requisites, if a Fifth Avenue shop kept them, would astound and demoralize the laity. Historically, they have included silk dressing gowns, cats, horses, pipes, mistresses, particular knick-knacks, exotic headgear, currycombs, whips, beverages and drugs, porcelain stoves, and hair shirts.³

I also tell about a friend of mine who writes a weekly newspaper column and who cannot start to write each week until he has pared his fingernails. I , tell about my own crochets; I must have absolute quiet, a stack of yellow paper, a black chinamark pencil for deletions, and quantities of diet ginger-ale. I point out that creative people in all disciplines, from mathematics to painting, apparently have these same kinds of quirks and routines.

I have found that would-be writers at any level find these tales about professionals illuminating and reassuring. They seem to give them confidence that they may be able to find a gimmick that will make their writing easier,

³Jacques Barzun, Writing, Editing, and Publishing, University of Chicago Press, 1977, p. 12.

and I encourage all writers to indulge themselves shamelessly in little luxuries to pamper their muse--except, as Barzun warns, alcohol. All writers also like to hear about the trouble most writers have getting started, and about the ingenious avoidance mechanisms we all devise, from cleaning the stove to recopying notes on fresh cards. But I also stress that productive writers work on a schedule, and that they write whether they feel like it or not. Balzac's comment, "I go to work like a baker goes to his shop," helps to debunk the myth that writers work only when they are inspired.

I have also found it useful from time to time to bring in pages of a rough draft of whatever I am working on at the time, and show them how many changes and deletions I make even in the first stages. Sometimes I bring in two or three versions of one paragraph and ask for their opinion on which one works best. As the semester progresses, I keep them posted on how I am getting along on my current project or tell them about some writing commitment I have made, what I must do, and what my deadline is. I also tell them that I almost never write unless I have to, but that I keep myself under pressure by making commitments. This sharing of my experience helps to demystify the writing process. I think it also raises morale and reduces complaints for students to realize that their teacher is having some of the same kinds of problems that they have. Now they begin to see the act of writing for the messy, tedious, and frustrating but rewarding process that it is.

Another way to initiate students into the steps of the writing process is to bring in facsimiles of author's edited manuscripts and show them the kinds of changes a writer makes. And it is important, I think, to stress that a writer changes what he or she has written not because the first version was a mistake, but because the act of writing is generative, and thinking develops

and advances as one writes. The second or third or fourth versions are not what the author should have written in the first place; they grew out of each other, and version four could not have been created without versions one, two, and three. Also, when students realize that most pieces of good writing develop slowly, they may understand how important it is that they allocate more time for their writing. I'll touch on that chronic problem again in a minute.

On the problem of writers' fears, Shaughnessy says,

For the Basic Writing Student, academic writing is a trap, not a way of saying something to somebody.⁴

I have come to believe that many, perhaps even most student writers have the same fears. We, and the English teachers our students have had before us, have helped to create those fears by overgrading, by being unwilling to let any lapse from the handbook norm go unmarked, by taking what Shaughnessy in another place has called the "Guarding the Tower" stance against the defilers of approved English syntax and punctuation. To quote her again,

Errors count, but not as much as most English teachers think.

... This emphasis upon propriety in the interest not of communication but of status has narrowed and debased the teaching of writing, encouraging at least two tendencies in teachers--a tendency to view the work of their students microscopically, with an eye for forms but with little interest in what was being said, and a tendency to develop a repugnance for error that has made erring students feel like pariahs.⁵

This whole matter of the high cost of "good English" is an emotional and political quagmire that I do not want to get into here. I will just confine

⁴Shaughnessy, p. 7.

⁵Shaughnessy, p. 120.

myself to saying that I believe strongly that no one writes well out of fear, and making two suggestions for reducing fear. First, one can design the writing situation so as to reduce risk by postponing evaluation. By requiring students to bring rough drafts of their papers to small peer-group conferences and thus allowing them to get help and feedback on their work before they write it for a grade, you lower anxiety and also guarantee that they will have to start the paper more than 12 hours before it is due. You can also reduce anxiety by having students bring their working notes to class and having them write on their work in a simulated writing laboratory situation. And I see nothing wrong with a teacher helping students with mechanics and syntax as they write. After all, we know from other research that students seem to assimilate grammar instruction only when they get it in the context of writing.

Second, I think every teacher should refrain from grading strictly by the book and instead devise his or her own workable standards. Take your models from clear, economical, everyday writing that gets the job done--for example Sports Illustrated, a brochure describing counseling services on campus, or a guide to a museum collection such as the one written for the King Tut exhibit. With that kind of writing in mind, ask yourself these kinds of questions. Do comma splices matter very much? Probably not. Does failing to distinguish between lie and lay or sit and set matter? Almost certainly not. Is it important to know the difference between who and whom? I doubt it. Does spelling really matter? I think the answer to that is "Yes", since I have concluded that people's reaction to bad spelling is emotional and social, not rational. Usually it does not really interfere with communication. In short, try to put yourself in the position of an intelligent non-academic person and make your judgments accordingly. I think you are more apt to get your students

to take your grading seriously if you put it in this kind of rhetorical context, and get rid of your image as a nit-picking English teacher.

Finally, Shaughnessy has put her finger on a deficiency of student writers that all of us have been aware of, but which, because of our commitment to the conventional precepts of composition teaching, we have felt helpless to correct; that is, their unwillingness or inability to revise their writing after it has been graded and returned to them. We suspect often that they don't even read our painstaking comments, and often we're right. What we have failed to see is that once a student has finished a paper and turned it in for a grade, he or she no longer cares about that paper. If she is forced to make corrections and turn it back in, she will do precisely that, and no more. For one thing, she has little understanding of what revision means; Nancy Sommers' research on revising has shown that. For another, to ask her to summon the energy to re-engage her mind with the content of the paper and improve on the way she has formulated that content when she is already confronting new work in that and other classes seems to her unreasonable, even arrogant on the part of the teacher. The paper is finished. She's bored with it. Let's do something else. If any of you has ever delivered a paper at a meeting, and when you returned home put that paper on the shelf because you could not prod yourself into revising it and sending it out for publication, you should be sympathetic. My own stack of such papers is embarrassingly high.

Some teachers claim that their students learn by revising in spite of these problems, but I think that in most cases, particularly with the less able students, after-the-fact revisions are not worth the anguish they put teacher and student through. Yet our belief in the axiom that all good writing is rewriting keeps us from abandoning revision. And I am not suggesting that

we should; what I am suggesting is that we redefine the term "revision" to mean rewriting during the writing process. Through demonstrations on the blackboard and overhead projector, through in-class tutoring sessions, through feedback on rough drafts, an instructor needs to show beginning writers how one revises as one writes, on a sentence-by-sentence, paragraph-by-paragraph basis. We need to show students how to break into a sentence and expand it, how to delete one part of a sentence and combine the rest of it with another sentence. Show them that one can leave a blank if the right word doesn't come to mind, or leave a gap for a supporting example and go on. Show them that, like a person making a dress, you don't have to finish the whole garment before you can find out how it is going to work. If you do that, you face the task of ripping it apart to redo it, but if you make adjustments as you go, piece by piece and section by section, you will probably turn out a fairly satisfactory finished product.

I call this kind of rewriting as one goes "creative revision"; Don Murray calls it "internal revision." It is a practice that reflects the dynamic nature of composing, and to me, it is at the heart of the teaching writing as process, not product. What one does about having students repair defects that still appear in the finished product is a decision for the individual teacher, but I think one should do some pedagogical cost accounting before insisting that all papers be redone until they are satisfactory.

Teaching Implications of the Britton Book

Although the Britton book is more difficult to follow than Shaughnessy's, and offers less immediate guidance to college writing teachers, it reports important conclusions that its research team has drawn about the kinds of

writing done in schools and about the processes by which that writing develops. I believe that composition teachers can profit from considering the teaching implications of at least three of those conclusions. They are:

1. The similarities between the writing methods of adolescent writers and professional writers are much greater than the differences.
2. By observing how writers behave during the pauses in the writing process, we can infer some of the essentials of that process.
3. Almost all school writing is done for teacher-as-examiner.

The first point, so similar to Shaughnessy's assertion that basic writers need to know more about what it means to write, suggests again that students would benefit from hearing the tales of creativity I have already mentioned. But Britton carries the issue further, saying that they found "irreconcilable differences between the way writers work, and the way many teachers and composition textbooks are constantly advising their pupils to set about their tasks."⁶ They point out that for both amateur and professional writers the writing process in one of conception, incubation, and production although these stages intermingle and overlap during the act of writing. Many composition teachers, however, seem to misunderstand or ignore the conception and incubation stages. As a result, Britton believes, much classroom activity in these stages is misguided, as "concentration is directed towards the marshalling of significant data, logical ordering, precision, exclusion of the irrelevant, justification of assertion and possible proof, and very often, the exclusion of the writer's individuality from what he writes."⁷

⁶James Britton, Tony Burgess, Nancy Martin, Alex McLeod, Harold Rosen, The Development of Writing Abilities, 11-18, Schools Council Research Studies, (London, 1975), p. 20.

⁷Britton et al, p. 27.

The team's analysis of students' responses to this kind of direction leads them to believe that too much stress on preliminary planning inhibits using writing as a tool for discovery, and consequently many students begin to write without really understanding or becoming involved in their task.

Britton's findings suggest that many teachers spend too much time teaching outlining and on preaching that a writer should know what he or she is going to say before starting to write. They suggest also that teachers should not prescribe the organization for a piece of writing or supply ready-made forms into which the students insert content. That approach short-circuits a crucial stage of the writing process: finding one's own voice and purpose. What teachers can do to help students in the conception stage is encourage free-wheeling conversation about the writing assignment, and show them how to brainstorm and generate ideas. They can also explain the incubation stage of creativity, and provide time for that incubation. When conception, incubation, and production have to go on simultaneously, as they often do in school writing situations, writers can seldom produce their best work.

Another significant finding of Britton's team was that the pauses writers make to go back and reread what they have already written are essential parts of the writing process. The investigators themselves tried writing on blank paper with carbon paper underneath it, using worn out ballpoint pens so that they could not see what they were writing but they would have a record of it. By this method and by asking writers to continue writing after covering the paragraphs they had just written, they discovered that writers find it virtually impossible to continue writing intelligibly if they cannot scan back over what they have already written. The need to go back was especially acute in expository or analytical writing and in poetic writing (that includes fiction);

it was important, but less crucial in simple expressive or narrative writing.

Their findings confirm what most of us have known instinctively: writing is recursive.⁸ We have to move back to move forward. The team concluded that "scanning back is needed to help the writer keep overall control of what he is doing, as well as to make corrections and improvements."⁹ In another place, Britton describes the operation by saying, "We got started again by reading what we have written, running along the tracks we have laid down."¹⁰ No wonder starting to write is so hard! We have no tracks and we must struggle to get them laid before we can move. Britton reports that experienced writers often have more trouble getting started than inexperienced ones, probably because they realize, even through unconsciously, that those first sentences may control the entire piece of writing.

For several reasons, I think students should know that as they write they need to keep looping back through what they have already written. First, they are more apt to take the time to go back and read what they've written if they realize that doing so is directly productive. Second, they will become aware that writing is a generative process; that they discover what they have to say by looking at what they have already written. Third, they can appreciate the importance of ^{free} writing or the kind of introductory writing that I call "circling"

⁸Charles Stallard's study of the writing behavior of good students done at Old Dominion University supports the point. His findings prove that good writers stop to reread what they have written four times as often as average students was published in Research in the Teaching of English, Vol 8, No. 2, Summer, 1974, pp. 206-218.

⁹Britton et al, p. 35.

¹⁰James Britton, "The Function of Writing," in Research in Composing, eds., Charles Cooper and Lee Odell, (NCTE, Urbana, Illinois, 1978) p. 24.

as a necessary preliminary to writing if they see it as the laying down of tracks on which to start their thoughts moving.

Finally, Britton's group discovered that two-thirds of the writing done in secondary schools is for one purpose and for one audience; it is transactional writing--that is writing done to inform, report, or analyze--and it is written for the teacher as examiner. In the last years of school, almost no other writing is done. They believe that this narrow focus and the systematic discouragement of expressive and developmental writing in schools stifles independent thinking and promotes conformity. It also fails to prepare students to write for varied audiences and varied purposes. Worst, it promotes the closed view of teaching as instruction rather than the open view of learning as exploration and discovery. They believe that we sacrifice much of the value of teaching students to write when we continue to view our job so narrowly.

I hope no interested person will substitute the summary I have given here for reading these books; they are important books and I have covered only a few of the highlights from an abundance of useful material. These studies represent major breakthroughs in our profession's attempt to put the teaching of writing on a sound theoretical and empirical basis. And it is from investigators like these authors, and from the dozens of other researchers now working in composition, that the much-needed revolution in the teaching of composition will come.

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